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ABSTRACT

Investigating the differences between students' conventional responses to the identification of writing topics and their responses to matters of real concern (as revealed through the use of "lifewriting" processes in the classroom), an exploratory study surveyed 455 eleventh and twelfth grade students at three large urban high schools. Students listed possible writing topics on 3 x 5 cards. After a class discussion about significant places, people, or turning-points in their lives, students wrote their final topic choice on the back of the card. (In the pilot study, three ninth grade classes simply listed their first topic choice.) Cards which contained both responses (61% of all cards) were analyzed, comparing initial and final topic choices. Initial choices included: (1) dreams; (2) fears and frustrations; (3) family relationships; (4) first experiences; and (5) vacations. The students' final topics included drugs, summer holidays, and family and pets, with grade 12 students emphasizing "putting one's life in order," "concern with finances," and "My Very First..." (love or car). Results indicated that students were struggling to find things in their lives to write about. (Appendixes include a handout describing lifewriting, a description of the lifewriting project, and instructions to the teachers involved in the study.) (MM)

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LIFEWRITING

Surfacing What Students Really Want to Write About

A Presentation at the NCTE Annual Convention, Los Angeles, 1987

by

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LIFEWRITING: SURFACING WHAT STUDENTS REALLY WANT TO WRITE ABOUT

LIFEWRITING IN THE ENGLISH PROGRAM

In a previous article, "Lifewriting: Reflections and Visions Through Writing Processes" (*Classmate*, Spring, 1988), based on our presentation at the CCTE Annual Conference in Winnipeg, we discussed the value of incorporating lifewriting into the writing strand of secondary English curricula. Our examples showed how students were able to write in a personal, expressive mode of writing as a foundation for the development of the writing skills demanded by more formal modes of writing. By writing about aspects of their lives which are important to them, students are able to improve their writing fluency at the drafting stage and show more commitment towards editing and revision for publication. The thirteen "starter" activities we suggested in the article were designed to enable students to explore topics from their life experiences and memories.

Most teachers, of course, do encourage their students to write in an autobiographical mode at some time. Moffett, (1968) recommends "phase autobiography" as the writing of short episodes from experience as a suitable writing activity for young students. Beach (1977) recommends "AMP writing"--his term for writin_ which includes autobiography, memoirs, and personal anecdotes. The work of Graves (1981, 1983) and the research of Calkins (1980a, 1980b), and Kamler (1980) all show how even very young children in the early grades demonstrate remarkable powers of commitment to the writing process when they retain "ownership" of their own topics.

This study, then, explores how students are able to reach deeper into their experiences, going beyond the instant, perfunctory response to an assigned topic, in order to surface ideas which are important to them as writers, creating the feeling of ownership in the writing process.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This exploratory study investigates the differences between students' conventional responses to the identification of topics for writing and matters of real concern, as revealed through the use of lifewriting processes in the classroom. Students in several urban high schools were asked to think about the important happenings in their lives. On 3x5 cards they were asked to list what topics they might want to write about. They were allowed to choose the option of "none." In each classroom the teacher then led a discussion about the sorts of topics they had chosen using the following prompts:

> •Are there places in your life that have special meaning for you, places which bring back memories, places that you associate with particular people or relationships, etc.?
>
> •Who are the people that you remember best or have affected you the most?
>
> •Can you identify any turning-points in your life, any events that seemed to have changed the course of your life, or incidents which now seem to be important?

The students were given scrap paper to make a time-line of their lives on which to locate any of the places, people, or events that had occurred to them. They were also encouraged to share their ideas with a partner, giving the reasons why such an idea seemed important to them, and to jot down any fresh ideas which occurred to them during the discussion. Finally the students were asked to write on the back of the card the one topic which they felt they could best deal with, supposing that they had to write about what was most important in their lives.

The 3x5 cards (without any students' names) were collected immediately to provide the data for this study. Comparison between students' first choices on one side of the card and their final choices on the reverse side revealed that the discussion, brainstorming, notetaking, and sharing of ideas had, in a majority of cases, resulted in the students finding deeper and more personal topics, ones which would seem to promote more involvement in the writing process if they were to carry the writing task to completion.

A PILOT STUDY--GRADE NINE RESULTS

In the pilot study which led to the development of the project, three classes of grade nine students were asked simply to note their choices about what they would like to write about in their lives. In the responses of the male students, bikes seemed to feature quite prominently, as in such suggestions as "My First Bike," or "Being Hit By A Bike." These grade nine male students seemed particularly prone to injuries and accidents. Other topics were "Being Hit By a Car," "Breaks, Pains, Sprains and Injuries--A History of Accidents," and "All of My Injuries."

Grade nine female students tended to suggest more personal topics, such as "When My Mum Got Remarried" and "Changing School." Two themes which recurred in several forms were "My Old House," and "Becoming a Christian."

These grade nine responses showed some promise of depth and a potential for development. Certainly some of the topics would allow the students to assume ownership and follow through with their writing. Nevertheless, on the whole, the topics listed by the students seemed more like perfunctory responses to an anonymous assignment rather than any real searching of personal experiences, memories, or values.

Consequently, when the study was implemented at the grade eleven and twelve levels, the design was modified to encourage the students to take a second look at their experiences, to reach beneath the surface of first responses. The technique of using 3x5 cards, one side for an initial response, and the reverse side for second thoughts following discussion and reconsideration, was designed to enable the students to surface deeper ideas which would sustain them through the efforts of written composition.

THE GRADE ELEVEN AND TWELVE STUDENTS

In this exploratory study, the responses obtained anonymously from 455 grade eleven and twelve students at three large urban high schools show interesting patterns of differentiation between male and female students, and more significantly between their first and second responses. There were also some observable differences between the grade eleven and grade twelve students. Generally, the responses of all of these students, aged between fifteen and eighteen, will be treated as one group.

The returned cards showed a preponderance of female (286) to male (169), of the students (N=455) who returned cards. As the rate of response was 68% overall of the 680 students who were surveyed in this study, the return suggests that female students were more willing to volunteer topics which they regarded as important. Of the 455 students, 33 (7%) either did not complete the reverse side of the card, or simply repeated the topics which were their first responses. The following results, therefore, are derived from the 61%, of all students who completed both responses.

FINDINGS

The first surprise was that the types of assigned prompts that have proved successful with *directed* lifewriting groups were not prominent in this

study. "Place," and "Turning Points" did not appear as significant categories. The "People" prompt did result in several students focussing on family relationships, especially on missing or absent fathers, and divorce. The only other person mentioned as a topic was a grandfather.

"Place" as a stimulus occurred exceptionally in the case of students of European origin, whose choices probably referred to their birthplaces. Several students chose a summer camp or family cabin in response to "Place." On the other hand, many initial responses fitted the categories of Dreams, Fears, and Frustrations.

The order of preference in initial choices was:

1. Dreams
2. Fears and Frustrations
3. Family Relationships;especially father, parents, divorce, with emphasis on being hurt by loved ones.
4. First Experiences: first driving experience (males); first boyfriend (females)
5. Vacations: What I did last summer; trips and travels--especially a visit to Disneyland

Two unusual aspects of these choices were that firstly there was not much evidence of joy or enthusiasm in any of the choices, and secondly few of the topics were future-oriented, probably because a function of the design would direct the students to past experiences rather than the future.

For the final choice, there is evidence in many of the submissions that the student was narrowing the topic, focussing more on a specific event. In the Vacations category the revised choices might be "My Trip to Disneyland Last Summer." In Family Relationships, the topic becomes "My

Father and His New Girlfriend." Four of the grade 11's chose the topic "Why I Became A Christian." There was evidence also of students constructing a generalized concept from a specific experience as in "Why Do Parents Who Hate Each Other Live Together?" introducing an increasing note of introspection, usually from a perspective that life is hard.

Many older students, compared to the peers in their class, especially the seventeen and eighteen year-old males, tended to focus on a specific event as in "My First Car Accident," perhaps because this is an issue of concrete and immediate concern, or more likely because this subject provides a cut and dried topic that would seem to be easy to write about, or a task to get finished as quickly as possible.

More generally it seemed that the students were struggling to find things in their lives to write about. One student noted that she did "not want to write or read about any boring teen topics." Another commented that "nothing important ever happened in my life." Others avoided the issue by suggesting interests that lie outside the scope of lifewriting, as in "Computers and Electronics," "Weaponry of World War II" and "Aircraft of 1935" by a student, perhaps a budding historian, who noted that the "good old days are more interesting than the present."

The actual final topics that were suggested included:

1. Drugs
2. Summer Holidays
3. Family and Pets: A Visit With My Father; The Death of My Dog

The grade 12's seemed to emphasize:

1. Putting one's life in order
2. Concern with finances, money--getting a well-paying job

3. My Very First. . .

--Love (females)

--Car (males)

The students' final choices (after being told to be specific) included such topics as

"The Day My Grandpa Died,"

"Falling in Love on a Bridge in Vanier Park,"

"My Skateboard,"

"The Death of My Mom,"

"Painful Memories--drugs, divorce, child abuse, suicide, sex, and marriage," and

"My Accident at the Corner of 41st Avenue and Knight."

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The results of this exploratory study show that for most students lifewriting is not to be regarded as a one-off attempt or single episode, but rather as a continuing, delving exploration of personal experiences, feelings, relationships and values. For the grade nine students, the straight off the top of the head first choice of topic may well provide a good stimulus for writing. The older students, given the opportunity for discussion and questioning of a topic, show that they can arrive at a more useful working title on a more clearly focussed topic. Investment of time through discussion and consideration pays off with a more reasoned or more developed topic. The evidence from these results supports the need to give students more time for peer discussion or partner interviewing where the loose structure of informal talk allows ideas to flow and expand. At first it may be necessary to have strong teacher direction and leadership, but with gradual retreating of the teacher role and increasing emphasis on student-centred discussion

groups. The study also supports the allowing of time for "try-outs" of a topic--i.e. tentative drafting of ideas and listing of possibilities before the student has to make a final choice of subject. There should also be time for the student to share the results of this initial drafting with peers, trying out the tentative topics with a supportive audience before making the commitment to the writing process. The emphasis here need not be on writing for examinations, or for grades, but for the intrinsic satisfaction and mutual joy in the exploration of life experiences.

Lifewriting at this preliminary stage may be something like the free flow or stream of consciousness of journal writing, sometimes called "blank prose," without much thought given to form and structure. Some work may remain at that level, but some will begin to take on a narrative structure with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. Memories, of course, often take the form of narrative, but some students will find that their lifewriting builds on the images and rhythms of free verse. Sometimes, personal narrative may be transposed to a third person story, in which the fictional setting gives the student writer more freedom in the distancing of the experience. A further development is to take the same technique into the field of social studies or science where students might make the imaginative leap to record and evaluate experience from the point of view of a famous explorer, politician or scientist, or simply to recreate the experience of an ordinary person during epoch-making times, where autobiography shades into biography.

REPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The method developed for this study of allowing students to make tentative choices for writing, then using discussion time to re-think and focus their ideas before making a final choice of topic is a useful one for

teachers. The mechanics of issuing and collecting 3x5 cards provides a simple classroom technique which will provide the teacher with useful knowledge of the students' interests and concerns. This is a non-threatening technique which gives teachers some idea of the depths of their students' interests and concerns. When we look at the spread of students' topics in their final, considered choices, we realize that there is no one assignment which will evoke all of the topics which students really want to write about.

As we say in our text *Lifewriting: Self-Exploration and Life Review Through Writing*, this approach to composition is not merely the writing of autobiography or the capturing of a wisp of memory, it is to do with the exploration of life, with the motivation and reactions to present living or even to possible, probable or fantastic futures. Lifewriting may begin with the facts generated by memory but it does not need to be bound by facts. Lifewriting belongs in the realm of imagination which can be stimulated or triggered by any event in the school, the home, the street, or elsewhere in one's daily life.

CONCLUSION

The results of this exploratory study need to be confirmed by replication with other groups of students at other grade levels and in other community settings. There is, however, support here for the position that high school students can benefit in their writing programs from being encouraged to write about their life experiences. The process of life review has long been regarded as beneficial to older people (Butler, 1963), when reminiscing can be an essential element to the process of life integration, a reconciliation of memory and experience, perhaps even a settling of old scores or a resolving of past conflicts. Yet lifewriting need not be limited to older people. Young people, too, have experiences and memories, and

expressive writing, in the free flow of "blank prose," allows students to recapitulate these experiences to find value in their pasts and direction for their futures.

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APPENDIX A

WHAT IS LIFEWRITING?

Simply, it is the putting down on paper of memories, experiences, and thoughts about one's life or even just about an event in that life.

At one level, it is the writing of an autobiography; at the other, it is the capturing of a wisp of a memory in three or four lines of prose or poetry.

It may even be the jottings that result from talking about events from one's life. These compositions need not be past-oriented--they can be about the present (something that happens today) or about the future (our dreams and hopes, possibilities and opportunities). And, of course, the exploration need not be bound by facts; it can look at the emotional history of one's life.

Lifewriting in short can deal with the motivations and reactions to present living, or with possible, probable, and even fantastic futures.

Lifewriting is a process that everyone can engage in because everyone has lived, has had experiences, has felt.

But why a teaching unit or writing workshop for these explorations and compositions?

Is not writing--and especially autobiographical writing--a private and solitary venture?

Yes, it can be, but lifewriting is also a social activity. More important, working with other people, talking about experiences and sharing reactions, actually helps one remember more. The process also serves to stimulate and keep the writer going in capturing these memories; the group work becomes not only an important social and therapeutic occasion but also helps the forming and rehearsing in the writers' minds what they will put down on paper.

We write to heighten our own awareness of life.
We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection.
We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it . . .
to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth . . . to expand our world. . . .

When I don't write I feel my world shrinking.

(The Diary of Anais Nin)

APPENDIX B

THE LIFEWRITING PROJECT

Teachers at all levels of education often encourage their students to write autobiographical stories or anecdotes. This form of personal, expressive writing has been shown effective in developing the most basic of the skills of writing--the ability to set ideas down on paper. Students learn to use writing to explore their ideas, and realize the value of writing in recording their life experiences. Students also gain a sense of pride in the achievement of being able to share their valuable memories. This foundation of expressive writing is essential if students are to develop abilities to meet the more formal demands of academic, business, or technical writing.

Students who show commitment in their lifewriting deserve the opportunity to share their ideas with wider audiences, perhaps even to see their writing published. The **LifeWriting Project** is aimed at the development of autobiographical writing at all levels and ages. In order to encourage such writing in elementary and secondary schools **The LifeWriting Project** will welcome the submission of short pieces of autobiographical writing, either in prose or poetry.

Each student will receive an individual, appreciative response to his or her piece of writing. Students whose stories show particular merit will be asked to submit their work for publication in the **LifeWriting Newsletter.** The best selections will be chosen for the **Anthology of LifeWriting,** to be published in 1987.

Student writing should be sent to:

The LifeWriting Project
Roy Bentley and Syd Butler
Language Education Department
University of B.C.
Vancouver, B.C. V6G 1Z5

SUBMISSION SHEET

Please attach a copy of this form to each piece of student writing.

To the LifeWriting Project

Title of Composition ..... *Date Submitted*.....

Student's Name: ..... *Age:*..... *Grade:*.....

Home Address:.....

.....

Teacher's Name:..... *School:*.....

School Address: .....

.....*Phone:*.....

APPENDIX C

LifeWriting Project,
Roy Bentley and Syd Butler,
U.B.C.

Topic Identification: Secondary Schools

INSTRUCTION TO TEACHER

1. Distribute blank paper. Assure the students that their responses in this exercise will be anonymous.
2. Ask students to jot down ideas or topics they would like to write on about important happenings in their lives.
3. Distribute a 3 x 5 file card to the students.
   i) On one side, ask them to fill in School, Grade, Age and Sex.
   ii) On the same side, list any topics or ideas the students have identified. IF THEY HAVE NOT COME UP WITH ANY IDEAS THEY SHOULD WRITE "NONE".
4. Ask the students to think again about important happenings in their lives. As they think, present the following stimuli:
   - "Are there places in your life that have special meaning, bring back memories . . . ?" etc.
   - "What people do you remember best, have affected you most?" etc.
   - "Can you identify any turning-points, any events that changed you, in your life?" etc.
5. Ask the students to jot down now any other ideas about important happenings in their lives.
6. Finally, ask the students to write on the back of the 3 x 5 file card, the one topic they could best write on if they had to, about important happenings in their lives.

SEND SETS OF CARDS TO:

Roy Bentley or Syd Butler
LifeWriting Project
Language Education Department
Faculty of Education
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, B.C.
V6T 1W5

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Roy Bentley 228 - 4943
OR
Syd Butler 228 - 5733

FRONT SIDE

SCHOOL: GRADE:
RESPONDENT'S AGE: SEX:
FIRST TOPICS/IDEAS:

BACK SIDE

TOPIC I COULD BEST WRITE ABOUT: